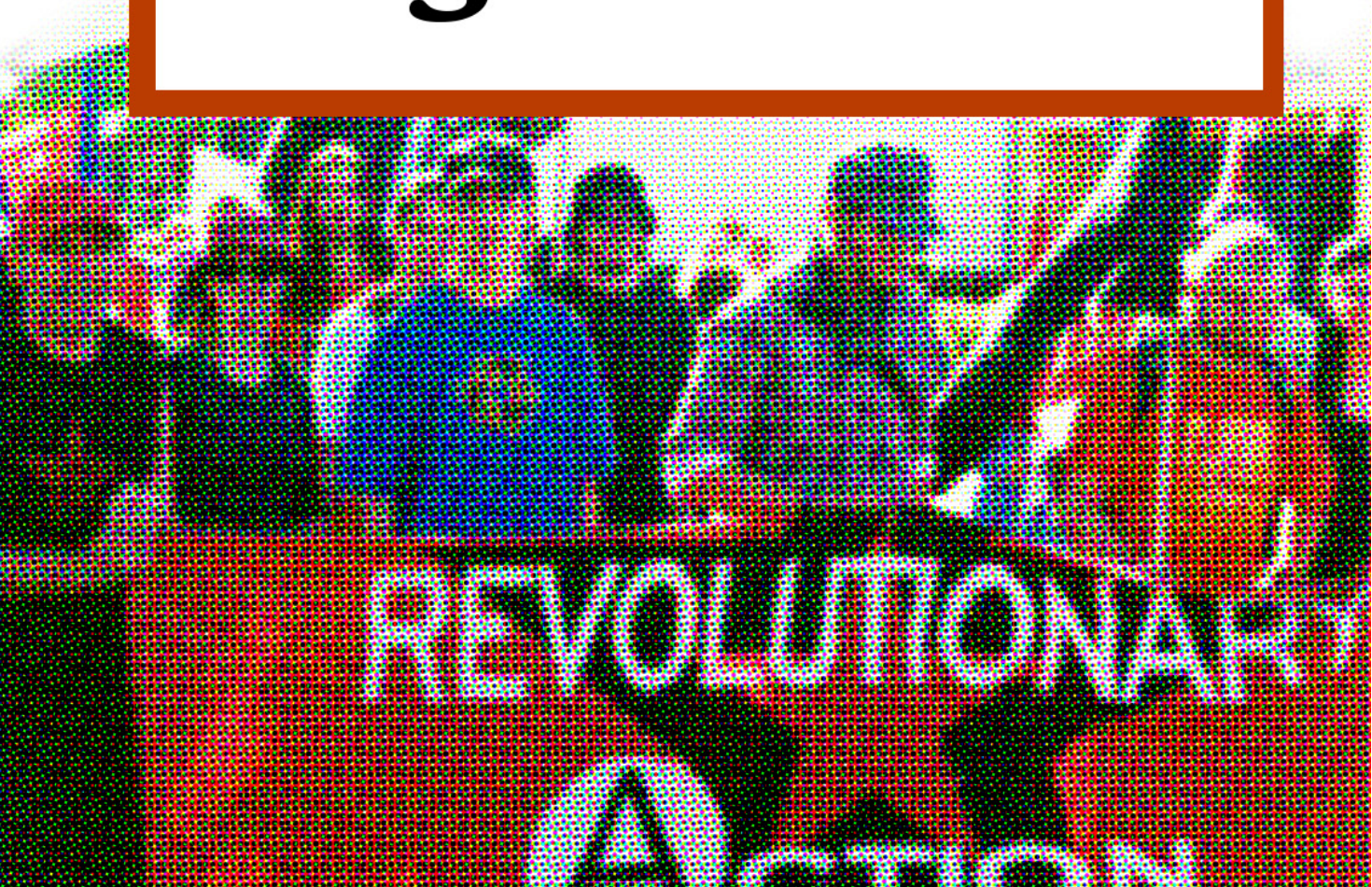
Thoughts on Revolutionary Action & the potential for a future revolutionary organisation



Thoughts on RA and the potential for a future revolutionary organisation

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Out of the experience of Revolutionary Action I gained a strong sense of the value of political organisation. Revolutionaries have long disagreed about the best method of political organisation. I believe that Revolutionary Action embodied many of the best of the new (and often quite old) ideas of libertarian communist and anarchist organising. Nevertheless, the collapse of RA as an organisation has to be faced if we are to forge a new organisation at some point in the future.

Political Background

RA members and supporters (for there was a divide) underwent immense stress from 2002-4, especially following the Woomera breakout. Despite the enormous success of the Woomera breakout and the campaign to free the refugees the degree of state repression which was used could not fail to elicit some response. In Wollongong itself the seeming failure of the Sandon Point protests to prevent the commencement of development of the land dealt a significant blow to the confidence of the movement. We began to taste defeat where the s11, Joy and m1 struggles had generally been regarded as great success stories.

With the bombing of the world trade centre in late 2001 the capitalist class forces began a new campaign of global terror against the insurgent population of the world. In Australia as elsewhere this led to increased repression, greater severity shown towards protests and protesters, an increased police presence etc. All of this had the effect of frightening the movement and undermining its confidence. The early success of the anti-war movement was met by capital with the launching of global class war, particularly focused on Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. Many participants in the anti-war movement saw the failure of the movement to prevent the invasion of Iraq as a sign of hopelessness and a feeling of pessimism became widespread. Disputes over the best tactics to use to stop the war also took there toll on RA. Internal differences arose between people who advocated more direct action and those who wanted to work with the broadest possible alliance against the war which inevitably meant working with people who had quite conservative political views.

Need for Revolutionary Organisation

Revolutionary organisation fulfils a number of needs. It provides a base of support and comradeship which is extremely valuable. Standing up to capital and the state can sometimes feel like a lonely place. Another need which revolutionary organisation fulfils is education and learning about politics, history and tactics.

The formation of a revolutionary organisation involves agreement on some basic set of principles or ideas. The process of producing, reviewing and discussing points of agreement helps to clarify politics for the individual and for the group. My experience

with organisations which have not sought to establish some sort of clear ideological base has been that they have difficulty in operating under pressure and often contain such divergent politics that they threaten the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the group. The formulation of a political programme strengthens participation in campaign groups where greater political differences between participants exist. This sense that there is a body of people with whom one shares a common set of beliefs and values is of great moral, social and political significance.

Form of organisation – Formal membership

Revolutionary Action was an organisation formed by people who had learnt most of what they knew about anti-capitalist political organising from left parties and other democratic centralist organisations. This is reflected in the original Platform and Rules in a number of ways. One such result was the creation of a formal membership. This was conceived in no small part due to a fear on our part that one of the left parties would attempt to sabotage the organisation from within. Membership was designed to give the original founding members a certain degree of power over who was admitted to full membership in the future and thereby ensure that no-one would be permitted to join the organisation who we felt had ulterior motives for doing so. Furthermore the prohibition against being a member of another political party or organisation was implemented with a similar goal in mind.

In practice these fears were never realised. Instead the existence of membership itself was challenged, as Mark describes in his thesis. The majority of people who were involved in RA over the years were not formal members of the organisation. Nevertheless, they made many contributions to the organisation. The rights of membership were basically confined by the rules to voting. As voting was not a part of the actual practice of RA membership became technically irrelevant. Nevertheless, it did function as a sort of hierarchy within the organisation. As a founding member I certainly felt a great deal of ownership and commitment to the organisation. Although I think that this hierarchy was not generally visible or particularly enforced it did exist. I think even the perception that it existed was enough to make some people wary of RA who would otherwise have agreed with most of the politics and actions RA took.

I believe that a future revolutionary organisation which embodies a similar politic to RA but learns from its lessons ought to abandon membership. Membership is not necessary and is not really compatible with the idea of the collective being a part of the class rather than a separate vanguard. RA's practice of meeting as an open collective and encouraging participation by all in the meetings, discussions and decision making was an extremely valid practice. The new organisation should be based on this model without the hang-ups about formal membership and the fear of entryism which was contained in the original decision to have a formal membership.

Theory

As a revolutionary I have found that thinking and theorising about revolutionary practice has great benefits in practice. Yet theory on its own becomes an empty practice which divides the class into those who are literate in the higher echelons of theory and those who are not. My experience in Revolutionary Action was that theoretical discussion was truly indivisible from practice. We talked about theory on picket lines, during protests, over dinner, in meetings and in written forms such as enRAged and by email. This was not a discussion of theory in the abstract but a theoretical discussion of practice. Practice which is not informed by reflection is reactive and often meaningless. It is all too common within the more radical section of the working class movement to act without proper reflection on the best way to act. If thought is not given to how best to engage in struggle that struggle often produces little result or the wrong result. Theory allows time for reflection and reappraisal and organisation allows a space within which this discussion may take place.

The left as a whole is deeply divided on many important theoretical and practical problems of revolutionary praxis. Indeed, much of the left does not even agree with the need for revolutionary practice and prefers more conservative and often merely reformist means. An organisation which shares a common vision, such as the need for revolutionary action, provides a common framework within which differences of a less substantial nature may be aired. They may not need to be settled. In the case of RA, we were able to do good work together despite not coming to an agreement on all things. For example, when some comrades decided to conduct an anti-election campaign, others were broadly supportive but did not completely agree with the politics. This led to a situation in which those who were interested and engaged in the politics of the campaign engaged in it and others who were not did not. The group followed the stated principles of internal democracy by publishing the papers of the campaign and discussion about it in enRAged despite these disagreements. The organisation was able to hold the contradiction, not crush it. This is an important strength without which an organisation cannot help but become dogmatic.

Propaganda

RA printed and published numerous booklets, leaflets, posters etc. which served to propagate revolutionary ideas. The organisation was able to do this due to its high level of organisation. To produce and print a pamphlet is not an immensely difficult operation but it does involve a number of parts. The material must be sourced or written, printed somehow on media which is acquired somehow and distributed. Our organisational form greatly facilitated this process. The production of a theoretical journal 'enRAged' was an extremely valuable component of the RA experience. The zine was widely distributed, giving an opportunity for all sorts of people to engage with our ideas. Yet it reflected very much the type of politics which RA fundamentally stood for.

Relations with other groups

During the life of RA we engaged with many revolutionary and progressive organisations. These relationships were sometimes tense due to sectarianism within the movement and

genuine political disagreements but were on the whole very productive. RA did not seek to set itself up against other left organisations. It attempted to work with them and to argue everywhere for revolutionary tactics. This strategy was based on the conviction that contradictions exist within all organisations over various political questions. Even those organisations which demand ideological adherence to the party line are in reality riven with contradictions and disagreements. Although two people may agree on a particular point of political programme, they may hold widely diverging views on what that point actually means. One of the strengths of RA was that it acknowledged this fact. In our founding document we explicitly acknowledged that there was scope for widely divergent political opinion within the group. This open admission of the fact of political difference saved us from the tedious process of rigidly defining a common 'line.'

Commentary on the RA Platform and Rules, revised version

Overall I am pleasantly surprised at how much of the original RA rules and platform I still agree with. I feel proud of the fact that we articulated a genuinely libertarian politic. Nevertheless, if I were to be involved in writing the document again or in writing a similar document for another organisation there would be differences. The experience of life in struggle against capital is a process which continually refines one's analysis of the questions of revolutionary praxis.

In the preamble, there is a sense of humour about the project, the politics and towards the old traditions of the left who "define their positions in huge textbooks where every I is dotted and every T crossed twice." I think that this humour was an important part of the reason for creating RA. A break from the self-righteousness of some of the traditional left and the lack of humour and fun in politics. The preamble states clearly that "we do not seek an exact position."

The aim of the collective as stated in the Platform is one with which I still wholeheartedly agree. I think that it expresses my own vision of the revolutionary process and the society which it seeks to create and creates in itself in embryonic form. The use of the word "contribute" refers to the politics of inclusion, cooperation and compromise which we tried to adopt in making a revolution. It is a sentiment which I feel has only been further strengthened in my mind since that time. One of the important aspects of the "Aims" is that it manages to state the highest ideals of communist politics with a minimum of jargon and by using words which are themselves highly contested.

The Working Class, The Multitude and The Proletariat

Throughout the document the term 'working class' was employed to refer to the subject which is exploited by capital and which struggles against it. In recent years my own discussions about the concept of class have moved away, as have most of my comrades, from the term 'working class' in favour of the term 'multitude.' Unfortunately, this term, though appealing in many ways has certain problems. The term 'multitude' tends to arouse a certain amount of hostility simply because it is so arcane. The term 'working

class' has had such general currency in the international movement for so long that it is difficult to introduce a new term without creating barriers to communication and understanding within the left.

The need for a term such as 'multitude' to describe the political class in struggle can also be questioned on historical grounds. Despite the attempts of some forces within the working class movement to narrowly define the class as male industrial wage labourers there have always been strong traditions within the movement that conceptualised the working class more broadly. One of the reasons which Negri and Hardt cite for their replacement of the 'working class' with the 'multitude' is that the term has been colonised by what are essentially Stalinist trends within the movement. By employing a new term they seek to open the political space of the class in struggle to include all elements. This is related to the concept of class composition. The multitude, as with the working class, has been thought of by some on the left to be an objective subject defined by the fact of its repression by capital. Autonomists argue that political class is a project. The class is the creation of interlinked struggles and the identification of common interests. The project of revolution is to consciously facilitate and advance the interconnection of struggles. This is class defined in action rather than in a static, idealised fashion.

In point one of the platform we defined the working class as 'the vast majority of society; consisting of everyone who must sell their labour-power to live.' This definition seems to encapsulate elements from both camps. On the one hand the definition is inclusive and was meant to include both employed and unemployed workers and workers who do unpaid work such as home-work. On the other hand it defines the class by its exploitation where today I would chose to define it by its resilience, power and struggle. In my recent discussion of these questions with Nick, at least in relation to academic writing, he advocated the use of the term 'proletariat.' I believe that he mentioned this in connection with a specific body of theory which has reclaimed the word proletariat. However, I don't feel that this term adequately solves the problem of definition either. It suffers from many of the same connotations as 'working class' without the virtue of novelty posed by the term 'multitude'.

Democracy

The discussion of terms given above does raise the idea of letting go of specific terms which have been overly colonised by capital and right-wing ideology. Unfortunately this is no solution. Our language incorporates the prevailing social struggle. In the use of language as in any other aspect of social life we engage in class struggle. The word 'democracy' has been ruthlessly exploited by the incumbent president of the United State, George Bush. His profaning of this term only makes me more determined to fight for democracy. The attempt by the ruling class forces to twist and subvert the term democracy, as with any other term, is an attempted colonisation of the mind. By attempting to poison even the language of hope they attempt to extinguish the possibility of change from our thought processes. Luckily for us these attempts are increasingly

futile as our class gains a deep understanding of the nature of 'spin' and political doublespeak.

Indigenous People

There is no mention in the platform of the place of indigenous people and the particular way in which capital oppresses them. I seem to remember that Dave tried to include something about the genocide of Australian indigenous peoples in the original discussions. My experience since being involved in drafting these principles has included working alongside indigenous people in both the Sandon Point and Hill 60 struggles. I have come to hold a very deep respect for indigenous people and an understanding of the extraordinary degree to which they have been exploited by capital. If I were to write a similar document again I would include a statement on indigenous peoples which made reference to their autonomy from capitalist social relations, their own communistic social relations, the extraordinary degree to which they have been subject to capitalist oppression and the power of their struggle.

Internationlism

In point 9 reference is made to the capitalist system as international. I think that the term international tends to dignify the existence of nations. I would rather describe capitalism as a global system as this term points towards the way in which capitalism and workers struggles transcend national boundaries. I think that this is one of the most important points in the programme. The existence of nation-states is completely reactionary. We have seen the ruling class deploy racism, nationalism and fear in relation to refugees and Muslims in the last 10 years. This is not a new strategy for capital but it is one which has certainly come right to the fore.

The effectiveness of nation-states and nationalisms in controlling the global multitude has been significantly undermined by the refusal of the multitude to recognise these boundaries. Those who refuse borders deserve particular mention in the platform. They are exercising a powerful tactic which Hardt and Negri call exodus. The movement of a class is something which no amount of border security can repress and it threatens the reactionary nationalist system and the very existence of international borders. We have already seen Europe collapse much of its internal borders and discussions are underway in Latin America towards similar liberalisation. The border separating Mexico from the United States is fluid and the movement of people north and of money south is helping to undermine it and to undermine the extremely racist American state. I recently heard one Republican presidential hopeful bemoan the coming into being of a bilingual America.

Environment

I think that the section on the environment could be significantly improved too. It is obvious that the environmental crisis has reached an extreme point. This must be at the forefront of our struggles.

Where to from here?

As if by magic I received an email only a couple of days ago announcing the intention to form a new group of "Libertarian Socialists, Anarchists, Autonomists, Radical Environmentalists, Situationists etc." It seems that the idea of reforming some sort of broad far-left grouping in Wollongong has not occurred in isolation.

My current position on this question is that I support it in general terms but that due to my life situation it would be impossible for me to make any kind of commitment. I was discussing this question recently with Nick when he pointed out the enormous amount of time and energy that he would want to invest in a new revolutionary organisation were he to become involved in one. This encapsulates my feelings. While I feel able to contribute to particular campaigns and to attend various types of protests I don't have the time, space or circumstances to permit my becoming involved in a revolutionary organisation. This is not a fact that I view with sadness. Everything has its season. I know in my heart that I will always be a revolutionary. At the current time I am engaged in my own personal struggle with capital and with myself. I will be able to work in a revolutionary organisation again at a later date.

The final thing that I noticed was missing from the platform of RA was love. Love is the politics which RA did actualise in its practice and it was one thing left out of the platform. Love is all there is. Love makes the world go round. Without love all the meetings and principles and struggles don't mean anything. The power of love is enormous and unstoppable and it underlies the entire meaning of a revolutionary movement. So the next time I become involved in a revolutionary organisation it will have to be predicated on the politics of love.

- Alexander Brown